

Asexualities, Intimacies and Relationality

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Introduction

Romantic asexual, aromatic asexual, grey-asexual and demi-sexualⁱ are just some of the identity categories which sit under the umbrella of asexuality. Since the founding of the online site AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) in 2001, we have seen the development of an asexual movement in primarily western liberal democracies. While AVEN defines an asexual individual as a person “who does not experience sexual attraction”, the terms above highlight a diversity with the ways in which asexual identified people experience and define their asexuality. This diversity includes different kinds of attraction, different ways of desiring and seeking out interpersonal relationships, and a range of intimacies, physical and otherwise (Gupta and Cerankowski, 2017). While research into asexuality has increased rapidly in the past two decades, there has been little academic attention to how asexual people conceive of and practice intimacy and relationships (Dawson et al., 2016).

In this chapter I add to the small body of academic scholarship that has focused on the experiences of friendship, relationships and intimacy of self-identified asexuals (Haeffner, 2011; Van Houdenhove et al. 2015; Dawson et al., 2016; Vares, 2018). Based on my research with 15 self-identified asexuals, aged 18 to 60 years, and living in New Zealandⁱⁱ (see Vares, 2018), I explore the ways in which participants are “actively and creatively renegotiating the boundaries of the platonic, the intimate and the sexual” (Carrigan, 2011, p. 476). I first consider the significance of friends in participants’ lives and, in particular, the ways in which the boundary between friend/partner and friendship/relationship is being disrupted. Second, I focus on the ways in which romantic identified asexuals negotiate sexual and non-sexual intimacy in partnered relationships with non-asexuals. It is important to emphasise that, as Dawson et al. indicate, there are no distinct “asexual practices of intimacy” (2016, p. 362), as there are equivalences with non-asexual practices of intimacy. However, I suggest that the asexual narratives in this chapter, which privilege a range of primarily non-sexual intimacies and ‘new’ relational forms,

contribute to reconfiguring and expanding the possibilities of relationality for self-identified asexuals and more broadly.

Disrupting the boundary between friend/partner and friendship/relationship

As indicated in recent literature, networks of friends and friendships are increasingly cited central sources of intimacy and support (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Chambers, 2013). This was also the case for participants in this study. Madison, for example, spoke about the importance of her friendship group as a source of physical and emotional intimacy:

Madison (23, grey-asexual): In our group, we were all very touchy, feely, like we'd lay on each other on the couch and we'd sit next to each other and sit on each other's laps [...] and it's a source of comfort as well.

For other participants, while relationships with friends were framed in terms of intimacy this was experienced predominantly in non-physical ways:

Philip (49, aromantic)ⁱⁱⁱ: I'm a reasonably social person. I love my friends. I love my family [...] I don't feel that I don't have intimacy in my life. I feel that I can be intimate with people. [...] I can get close to people but it's usually through speaking with them, yeah. [...] I don't have any need for physical contact. I mean physical contact can be pleasant but it's not like I desire it or want it. [...] I like to think in terms of love, you know, I do love people. I'm a caring person. I look out for them.

Philip orients himself to the construction of aromatic asexuals (who don't desire sexual or romantic relationships) as having no intimacy in their lives and thus being "isolated, disconnected and lonely"^{iv} (Francis, 2016, p.28). Philip's constitution of himself as a person who: is social; loves his friends and family; thinks in terms love; and can be intimate with people, is doing the discursive work of establishing the "truth" of his account. This challenges the dominant construction of those not in romantic and/or sexual relationships (including non-asexuals) as somehow missing out on "real" love and intimacy, and therefore unhappy. This relates to a hierarchy of love and intimacy in which the presence of sex and

love in a relationship puts it on a “higher plane of happiness” than a relationship without (Jamieson, 1998, p.108). Sara Ahmed (2010), for example, discusses the way in which happiness is attributed to particular objects such as the family and the loving, sexual partnered relationship. We thus get oriented towards these objects and “happiness becomes very quickly the promotion of certain ways of living” (2010, p.11). Philip acknowledges this orientation while simultaneously refusing to be “banished from the narrative of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p.17). His explicit framing of love thus disrupts this hierarchy of love and happiness. Love, he goes on to explain, is not limited to “the one”, and that, “when people do talk about ‘the one’ or finding my soul mate or my other half or whatever, I’ve really had very great difficulty getting my head around that”. Rather, Philip “think[s] in terms of love” and intimacy in ways that are more expansive, collective and non-hierarchical.

Similarly, as Gabriella talked about her “vast array of friendships” she acknowledged a hierarchy which privileges sexual intimacy:

Gabriella (32, romantic): Most people - it’s probably going to be a horrible generalisation - [but] I understand that most people form close and intimate relationships more for the sexual relationship than they do for anything else that they get, because you can seek out close companionship and trust and really close friendship with a variety of people but you usually have a sexual relationship with one person. Whereas I have a vast array of friendships that I can draw on for that social and emotional empathic support.

Gabriella orients to what she calls a “horrible generalisation” which is the dominant construction of “close and intimate relationships” being with one person and being sexual, while challenging this through acknowledging the significance of the friendships in her life. Thus, like Philip, she emphasizes ways of connecting and belonging to many people rather than just to one person. However, For Gabriella there are some difficulties in giving meaning to her close friendships, both for herself and to others:

Tiina: So [...] you don’t have a kind of a desire to be in a partnered relationship?

Gabriella (32, romantic): No. I mean I've got very close friends that *I would almost count like that*, but that conversation hasn't been had and won't be had for various reasons, whatever, you know. Moving on [laughs].

Although the boundary between friend and partner is blurred by Gabriella's comment that some very close friends "almost count" like partners, she has no intelligible way to describe such relationships to her friends (or to me in the interview). In a similar vein, Kristen Scherrer (2010) argues that we need new forms of language to describe the relationships asexual people engage in beyond simple single and coupled, and friend and relationship. It is interesting, although perhaps not surprising, that Gabriella will not discuss this with the people involved, "that conversation [...] won't be had". This refusal can be understood in terms of the dominant construction of friendship as emotionally intimate but not romantically and/or sexually intimate. As Gabriella points out above, "close and intimate" relationships are constituted as those in which sexual practices occur. This is because the "presence of sex marks out romantic intimacy and love from other forms of intimacy" (Dawson et al., 2016, p.350). Gabriella's 'friendships', like Philip's, thus 'trouble the larger legitimating sexual and romantic order of things' by 'extending understandings of intimacy and love from couple-centric connotations to terrains of collectivity and friendship (Francis, 2016, p. 29, 30).

In contrast to Gabriella, James has found the AVEN forums, in which the nuances of attraction are discussed and debated, useful for making sense of his "feelings" towards others. James, who identifies as aromantic and queer, employs the term "queer platonic relationship" to describe a relationship form he might like to have with another man:

James (18, aromantic): It'd be nice if like we were in a QPR, queer platonic relationship, but I don't know if I'll want something further than that or like if I'm actually crushing on him or if I'm only squishing on him, I don't know.

Tiina: When you say squishing?

James: That's like platonic crushes.

Tiina: Okay.

James: We [AVEN online community] go very into detail in terms of attraction. There's platonic attraction, romantic attraction, sexual attraction, aesthetic attraction, there's a few others I can't remember off the top of my head but yeah.

Although James identifies as aromantic he talked about questioning his aromantic orientation and the possibility that he might be grey-romantic (where he may experience romantic attraction, although not very often, but not desire a romantic relationship). This was prompted by James experiencing an attraction to someone which he found difficult to conceptualise. He thought a QPR (queer platonic relationship) might "be nice", that is, a relationship that is "above best friend but it's not a romantic partner, it's kind of like in the middle". He is however uncertain if he would want "something further" because he is unsure if he is "crushing" or "squishing" (James was the only participant to use the latter term). A crush is generally framed as a romantic attraction to another person^v. However, a squish is a non-romantic or platonic crush. It is like a crush but lacking interest in forming a romantic couple. It involves an intense feeling of attraction, liking, appreciation, and/or admiration for a person you want to get to know better and become close with.^{vi}

The usefulness of detailing different forms of attraction on AVEN is debated with some arguing that terms like squish and crush are "confusing" and potentially "alienating" asexuals^{vii}, while for others they are ways of reconceptualising and understanding the attractions and feelings they experience. For James, there is confusion and uncertainty but also a sense that such terms open up possibilities which were limited with his identification as aromantic (for example, thinking he may be grey-romantic). This highlights the ways in which attraction, asexual identification and modes of relating are extremely fluid and shifting, and the possibilities for constitute 'new' subject positions and modes of affective relationality.

Negotiating intimacy in romantic, partnered relationships with non-asexuals

Aside from James and Philip, the other participants in this study identified as romantic asexual or grey-asexual and desired a romantic, non-sexual, partnered relationship, ideally with another asexual. However, they also acknowledged this was unlikely given most of them had not met another asexual in person. Hallie (27) was the exception, having had two online relationships with asexual men in other countries.

While only one participant was in a partnered relationship at the time of the interviews, most had been in some form sexual relationship in the past. Although Mike (22) and Aidan (23) described themselves as sex “repelled” and “repulsed”, they initially felt pressured by non-asexual female partners and as a result did “try [sex] a few times”. Discovering asexuality as an identity (through online searches) was significant for both men and proved a turning point in their negotiation of dating and relationships. Most of the older participants had been in long term sexual relationships or marriages (given the relatively recent emergence of asexuality as an identity). Angela (56), Sarah (47), Kathy (60) and Hallie (27) had stayed with partners or husbands because they desired the relationship but not the sex. Sarah, for example, spent many years in relationships where she “put up with” unwanted and painful sex with men or unwanted sex with women, “I thought I have to have sex because that’s what you do, and it hurts and I don’t like it, but I have to do it. [...] I would justify it to myself as what I had to do to get what I wanted which was a partner”. Angela had married even though she was “revolted” by sex:

Angela (56, romantic): I was revolted by sex, revolted, absolutely revolted by it, but I wanted the idealised view of what a family was, which was like children and the house [...] I wanted the whole thing, yeah, but I didn’t want sex. Not at all. And so when I came to uni when I was 18, I very quickly got pregnant and married. [...] The reason why we split up was because I didn’t want anything to do with my husband sexually. I loved him. I loved him but I didn’t want him.

Like the younger participants, the constitution and visibility of asexuality as a sexual identity enabled these women to negotiate partnered relationships in new ways. For Sarah, identifying as asexual allowed her to say “no” to sex and to “look after herself”. She is currently seeking a non-sexual, monogamous relationship (see Vares, 2018). Hallie was able to leave an abusive relationship and found that online relationships with other asexuals worked for her, “I didn’t want an in-person relationship - I don’t have time for that”. Kathy and Angela’s more recent experiences highlight different ways of negotiating partnered relationships with non-asexuals. Kathy met and married her husband after she identified as asexual and when they were both in mid-later life. Kathy’s recognition of her asexuality enabled her to feel in control of her decisions, from marrying to engaging in some sexual practices. Although she didn’t disclose her asexuality her husband, she was comfortable “gifting” sex to him:

Kathy (60, romantic): So yeah, we did have relations but it wasn’t full on and it wasn’t one hundred percent and it wasn’t scheduled. [...] I was more than happy to satisfy him or pleasure him, more from the love I felt for him than from the actual desire of doing it [...] and I mean, it makes him happy and it makes him feel like a man because he had some issues with losing mobility and stuff like that. [...] I have no problem because I figured he gave me so much [...] and you know this may sound rude but what’s a blow job in the long run [...] and if it made him happy, and he was happy, then good and I got a nice cuddle. But you know we were perfectly happy sitting on the couch together watching films.

Lorca Sloan defines “gifting sex” as participating in any behaviour that sexually arouses or satisfies one’s partner and “not because the acts themselves are viscerally appealing or physically pleasurable” (2010, p.557), and clearly this is not unique to those identifying as asexual. Although Kathy finds sex unappealing, she explains her actions as being for her husband out of love, reaffirming his masculinity, making him happy, and reciprocating what he gives to her in the relationship. In their study of the intimate practices of asexuals, Matt Dawson et al. (2016) refer to such sex as a “practice of intimacy”. They indicate that this practice occupies different positions in their participants’ lives, from those offering sex as a valued part of the relationship to those who engaged in sex due to pressure. In my study, Kathy was the only romantic identified participant who gifted sex in a relationship after coming to identify as asexual.^{viii} Her husband’s age and ill health, which resulted in infrequent sexual activity,

inform Kathy's acceptance of her actions which she contextualises as just one aspect of their intimate lives.

However, gifting sex was not considered a possibility for other participants, for example, Sarah and Angela (above). After separating from her husband Angela "desired a partnership". She goes on to explain, "I thought about it in terms of a male partnership, heterosexual I suppose. I desired that. I really wanted that but I don't like what comes with it [sex]". A few years ago she began a partnered relationship with a non-asexual man. Angela was clear from the start that sex wasn't a possibility for her. Her partner has been accepting of this and Angela hasn't experienced any pressure to go beyond the physical intimacy she is comfortable with:

Angela (56, romantic): We do sleep together, sometimes we hold hands in bed but we don't hug and we don't have sex. [...] We always kiss each other in the morning and at night, but it's not lingering kisses or anything like that, you know, and we often hold hands. [...] After work [...] we make dinner together and then we usually watch something on a DVD and we just sit on the couch and yeah, it's a really nice time. It's like we're sitting close and either holding hands or he's got my feet in his lap or something like that but it's nice and it's non-threatening. [...] In countless ways every day he shows me he loves me without anything physical happening.

As with Kathy, non-sexual and often non-physical intimacies featured significantly in Angela's narrative. Yet Angela's experience is one I have not yet encountered in the existing research (to date), that is, where she experiences no pressure to engage in sex, there is no ongoing discussion or negotiation, and she experiences no guilt. When asked if she was aware of any sexual desires on the part of her partner Angela replied: "[He] just doesn't seem to be concerned about it himself [...] and I suppose I just have a different view now and it's a bit more mercenary. It's kind of like, well he can sort that out himself, you know". Here Angela takes up a resistant feminine subject position in which she has no interest in, and takes no responsibility for, her male partner's sexual needs/desires.^{ix} As indicated above, while a non-sexual relationship of this kind is part of the lives of some non-asexuals (for example, if sexual interest, ability and/or desire decrease), what is significant here is the absence of any sexual practice from the outset of the relationship. This highlights the possibility of romantic, partnered relationships

between asexual and non-asexual identified individuals where sex is not required or expected as a practice of intimacy.

Conclusion

Mark Carrigan argues that if “sexual intimacy ceases to be the *sine qua non* of intimacy then the boundary between friendship and relationship also become fuzzier” (2012, p.15). In this chapter I have explored some of the ways in which some self-identified asexuals’ experiences of relationality blur the boundary between friendship and relationship in various ways. For Philip and Gabriella, love and intimacy are not restricted to one person, but to many - what Mark Francis calls “collective belonging” (2016, p. 42). This disrupts the discursive privileging of consummated, (hetero)romantic love over others and opens up other ways of knowing and talking about relationality (Francis, 2016). Although language for making sense of such relationality is limited, the asexual online community is engaged in conceptualising the diversity of attractions and creating “a new vocabulary for exploring sexuality and intimacy” (Chu, 2014, p.191). James’ reflections on his shifting attractions in a relationship which would ideally be between “best friend” and a ‘romantic partner’ “literally *make[s]* [his] unique and often confusing relationships *make sense*, that is they render otherwise non-normative relationship intelligible” (*italic in original*) (Chasin, 2015, p.177).

For the majority of romantic identified participants in this study, monogamy featured centrally as a desired or actual partnered relationship form (as for the asexual participants in Scherrer, 2008, and Dawson et al., 2016). While mono-normativity is thus reinscribed, it is simultaneously challenged with the decentering of sexuality. Although gifting sex as a practice of intimacy is one way of negotiating a romantic relationship with a non-asexual, Angela’s experience highlights the ultimate decentering of sex in a relationship with a non-asexual. It is important to acknowledge that this form of romantic and non-sexual relationality is not mentioned in the existing literature (to my knowledge), yet makes intelligible a relationship, (with a non-asexual) in which there has *never been* any sex or pressure to engage in sex. This small nature of the study on which this chapter is based, and the diversity of

intimacies and rationality discussed, highlights the need for further research into asexual intimacies, for as Jacinthe Flore argues, asexuality “offers a location, both discursive and material, from which to refresh ‘known’ realities about intimate life” (2014, p.74).

ⁱ Romantic asexuals generally do not experience sexual attraction but do experience romantic attraction and often desire an intimate, non-sexual partnered relationship. Aromantic asexuals generally do not experience sexual or romantic attraction. For individuals who identify as grey-asexual or demi-sexual, sexual attraction is a possibility in special circumstances, for example, once a relationship has developed.

ⁱⁱ Participants were recruited through a number of online sites, for example, AVEN, a queer youth support group, a student recruitment website and Asexuals New Zealand Facebook. Ten of the participants responded from the latter. Although previous studies have recruited primarily through AVEN, for this project only one participant responded to the AVEN posts. 2 participants identified as aromantic, 12 as romantic and 1 as grey-asexual. With respect to ethnicity, the majority were Pākehā (the indigenous term for non-Māori), one was Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand), and one Iranian. Interviews were conducted either in person (10) or by phone (5). Some participants asked for a phone interview and for others, my travelling to their location was not practical at the time. The interviews lasted between 35 and 120 minutes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Following the pseudonym of the participant is their age and asexual self-identification. When presenting extracts from interviews I have generally omitted word repetitions and speech hesitations (i.e., all terms such as ‘um’ and ‘ah’). The presence of three consecutive dots [...] indicates a portion of speech has been cut.

^{iv} See Mark Francis’ (2016) analysis of three recent films which “intentionally or unintentionally” consider asexuality (*Bill Cunningham New York*, 2010; *(A)sexual*, 2011; and *Year of the Dog*, 2007). He argues the films “overtly establish ties between asexuality and singlehood” and represent the “asexual single” as isolated, disconnected and lonely (2016, p.28). Although they “never condemn the asexual-single” they do “cast doubt on how such a person could thrive in a culture in which consummated romantic relations are the norm” (Francis, 2016, p.31).

^v This is distinguished from sexual attraction which is broadly referred to as a feeling that sexual people get that causes them to desire sexual contact with a specific other person.

^{vi} From the Urban Dictionary <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=squish>

^{vii} See <https://www.asexuality.org/en/topic/111367-squish-vs-crush/>;
<https://asexualagenda.wordpress.com/2012/09/09/defining-crushes/>

^{viii} In Ellen Van Houdenhove et al.’s study of the experiences of asexual women, two participants also had sex as a way of “showing love” and for their non-asexual partners and described this as a “sacrifice” they were willing to make (2015, p.271).

^{ix} See Vares, 2018 for a discussion of how some female participants felt responsible and/or guilty for arousing their non-asexual male partners’ sexual desires and ‘leading them on’.

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